

Character Class

Spellthieves with Class

By Skip Williams



This column aims to provide players with tips on creating effective and interesting characters of various types. So whether you're a beginning player creating your very first character or an experienced gamer looking to put some punch into an old standby, this column is for you!

The Pros and Cons of a Spellthief

The spellthief occupies a peculiar niche between rogue and sorcerer. He is a cunning and stealthy spellcaster, but his signature ability is the power to filch magical capabilities from other creatures. For the astute player, therefore, a spellthief offers unequaled potential for rewarding play.

Spellthief Assets

The spellthief has a broad assortment of potent game abilities that offer ample room to customize your character. You can turn your spellthief into a sly trickster, a confidence man, a burglar, an intrepid explorer, a hedge wizard, or almost any other archetype that requires a bold attitude and a little magical aptitude. Below are several assets you have going for you when you choose a spellthief.

- **High Skill Points:** With 6 skill points per level (an allotment exceeded only by the rogue), a spellthief with a decent Intelligence score can buy plenty of skill ranks.
- **Broad Skill Selection:** The spellthief's long list of class skills enables him to excel at many different tasks, including fast talk, stealth, knowledge, perception, and more.
- **Winning Ways:** A spellthief needs to have a high Charisma score because that ability governs his spellcasting. But high Charisma also gives him an edge in nonviolent dealings with other creatures.
- **Good Will Saves:** A spellthief uses the best save progression in the game for Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural mental strength helps him resist most effects that fool his mind or assault his spirit, including charms, compulsions, illusions, fear effects, and even *inflict* spells.
- **Fair Weapon Selection:** The spellthief is proficient only with simple weaponry. Though simple weapons aren't the most deadly ones available, the fact that the spellthief has access to the whole category gives him plenty of options should his spells and class abilities happen to fail him.
- **Spells:** Starting at 6th level (or as early as 4th level if his Charisma score is high enough), the spellthief gains access to slightly more than half of the sorcerer/wizard class spell list. Specifically, he can learn spells from the schools of abjuration, divination, enchantment, illusion, and transmutation. Most of these



spells aren't very spectacular, but they're undeniably useful.

Furthermore, a spellthief doesn't have to carry spellbooks; instead, he chooses a personal repertoire of spells that he can cast anytime. He does have a daily limit on the number of spells of each level he can cast, but he can freely cast any spell he knows until he reaches that limit. So he doesn't have to guess ahead of time which spells to prepare -- if he needs to cast a particular spell several times in the same day, he can do so.

- **Sneak Attack:** Starting at 1st level, the spellthief can hit opponents where it really hurts if he can catch them unawares.
- **Spell Stealing:** Also starting at 1st level, the spellthief gains his signature ability -- he can sneak attack a spellcaster and literally steal a 0- or 1st-level spell. His foe loses the prepared spell or spell slot for the day, and the spellthief can either cast the stolen spell himself or use its energy to cast one of his own spells (if he knows any). As the spellthief attains higher levels in the class, he can steal even higher-level spells.

Starting at 2nd level, the spellthief can use a sneak attack to steal a spell effect (that is, purloin a spell that has already affected another creature) and use it on himself, provided that the spell in question is one that the original caster could cast on him.

Starting at 3rd level, a spellthief can use a sneak attack to steal 10 points of energy resistance from another creature, temporarily making it his own while reducing his foe's protection by 10 (minimum 0). As he attains higher spellthief levels, he can steal larger amounts of energy resistance.

Starting at 5th level, the spellthief can use a sneak attack to steal a spell-like ability from another creature and use it once. His foe not only loses one daily use of the stolen ability, it also temporarily loses the power to employ any remaining uses that it might have.

Starting at 15th level, the spellthief can use a sneak attack to temporarily steal some or all of a foe's spell resistance. He gains spell resistance as indicated in his class description, and his foe's spell resistance is temporarily reduced by 5.

- **Many Other Class Features:** As the spellthief attains higher levels in the class, he also gains powers that protect him from hostile spells, let him detect magical auras, and make his spell stealing power more efficient.

Spellthief Weaknesses

As with any class in the **D&D** game, the spellthief's advantages come at a price. Below are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a spellthief character.

- **Poor Fortitude and Reflex Saves:** Spellthieves have the worst progressions for Fortitude and Reflex saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Thus, they aren't so great at shrugging off diseases or poisons, nor are they very adept at evading mostly physical dangers, such as traps. The spellthief's spellgrace class feature helps offset these weaknesses to some degree, but only when the attack comes from a spell. In any case, spellthieves who favor tomb breaking, dungeon delving, or trap springing are likely to feel their poor Reflex saves most sorely.
- **Fairly Low Hit Points:** The spellthief's 6-sided Hit Dice give him only a moderate number of hit points. But although he risks death with nearly every fight, his sneak attack ability and the magic-stealing powers that depend upon it are wasted if he tries to avoid combat.

- **Fairly Low Armor Class:** The fact that a spellthief has proficiency with only light armor (and no shields) leaves him with only a mediocre Armor Class. The combination of modest hit points and middling Armor Class usually means that a spellthief can afford to fight a little, but he doesn't have much staying power in a long battle. He can improve his defenses in various ways, but all of them deplete his resources.

Playing a Classy Spellthief

Great spellthieves usually use the following techniques, so if you're playing one, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

Get into the Action

Depending on which skills and spells you select, you may frequently find yourself in a position to make a difference for your party. For example, if you have a suite of stealth skills, your party might depend on you to probe the path ahead, testing for danger and locating foes to confront. Likewise, taking primarily divination spells can help to uncover opportunities for the group. But even if you prefer wit and guile to combat, it doesn't pay for you to skulk at the back of the party because you can't make sneak attacks and steal spells if you don't get into the fray.

Magic-wielding foes are your prime targets in any fight. Your magic-stealing abilities can hurt them very badly and give you new powers at the same time. So think twice before avoiding a confrontation with any spellslinger.

Weigh Your Risks

Boldness is a necessity for you, but beware of getting into trouble that you can't handle. Above all, avoid taking unnecessary chances and putting your companions in danger without their knowledge or consent. You have the power to attempt a lot of different actions, but don't commit yourself to any undertaking unless you have a pretty good idea of what you stand to gain. If the benefits you can expect from your intended action don't outweigh the risks, think up another plan.

Keep Your Options Open

You can't always know what tricks and stratagems will work in a given situation, and you probably won't know in advance just what spells or spell-like abilities you'll be able to steal from a given foe, so be prepared to act whenever you happen upon an unexpected asset. Doing so usually requires a basic plan and at least one backup plan.

Escape may well be your best option when a situation goes sour, so always have a plan for getting yourself out of whatever you've gotten into -- and make sure that your plan only requires the resources you have on hand.

Remember Your Friends

Facing danger alone is a good way to get yourself killed, so don't charge into battle unless you're sure you can count on your allies to back you up. If you're serving as the party's scout, don't stray too far ahead of the main group, and always consider how your friends fit in when choosing a course of action.

The Party's Main Warrior: This character's combat abilities can spell success or failure for you. Working together with him to flank foes brings your sneak attack and magic-stealing abilities into play. Likewise, this character is

your best hope if you find yourself in a situation you can't fight your way out of alone. And since your perception skills (such as Spot and Listen) are probably better than his, the warrior depends on timely warnings from you to prevent disaster from befalling him.

The Party Scout: If your party has a monk, ranger, or rogue, be prepared to work with that character to maximize your own potential. You can work particularly well with a rogue because the two of you can team up to flank and sneak attack foes.

The Party's Arcane Spellcaster: This character is weaker and more vulnerable than you are when it comes to physical combat, so be prepared to come to her aid when trouble arises. But if you want to stay in her good graces, resist the temptation to filch spells from her without permission. Even if the arcane spellcaster is occasionally willing to let you steal a spell from her with a harmless touch, don't annoy her with constant requests to "lend" you spells. Save such borrowing for situations when your group needs to cast a large number of spells in a hurry, or when the party's arcane spellcaster is somehow disabled and unable to cast her spells except through you.

The Party's Divine Spellcaster: Get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric, druid, or paladin. This character's healing spells can stave off death, especially when you manage to get yourself poisoned or fall victim to some other debilitating attack. He can also provide you with some useful spells to cast, but resist the temptation to borrow his spells on a regular basis.

Some Key Equipment

The right gear can help you quite a bit in your career as a spellthief. Here's a brief rundown on the essentials.

- **Armor:** Plan to stick with light armor and no shield. Light armor doesn't provide great protection, but it's better than no armor at all, and it won't give you an arcane spell failure chance. Leather or studded leather offers decent protection without interfering too badly with any stealth skills you've chosen. A chain shirt is the best armor available to you, but it's expensive and hinders your stealth.

If you're combat-oriented, consider medium armor (such as a breastplate) made of mithral. Such armor is very costly, but it functions as light armor, so it imposes no arcane spell failure chance. However, you still have to take the usual penalties for nonproficient armor use while wearing it unless you spend a feat to become proficient with medium armor.

You need all the Armor Class you can get, so add other defensive items, such as *rings of protection* and *amulets of natural armor*, whenever you can afford them. Keep in mind that several lesser items whose bonuses stack give you better protection at a cheaper price than one big item does.

- **Primary Melee Weapon:** To make sneak attacks and steal spells, you have to get into combat, so you need a good melee weapon. A spear deals good damage and can prove useful when you want to probe surfaces for unseen dangers while scouting ahead. A longsword has reach and can help keep your foes a little farther off. But both of these weapons require two hands, so you might want to consider a heavy mace or morningstar (both one-handed weapons) instead.
- **Backup Melee Weapon:** Always keep a light weapon -- or two -- handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or hand axe, can help get you out of a tight spot (such as being swallowed whole by a big monster). It also pays to have a hefty weapon on hand in case you lose your primary one or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, if you normally use a spear (a piercing weapon), consider a mace (a bludgeoning weapon) as a

backup. A sap can also prove handy to subdue foes for later questioning or capture spellcasters who can provide you with a supply of extra spells.

- **Ranged Weapon:** You can greatly increase your survival chances by keeping your foes at a distance during combat. If you can keep the range down to 30 feet or below, you even retain some ability to use sneak attack. A heavy crossbow deals excellent damage but has a slow rate of fire. A light crossbow deals less damage, but you can usually shoot every round. And don't forget that daggers and hand axes can be thrown.
 - **Backup Spells:** You never know when you'll run out of spells, or foes from which to steal them, so it pays to keep some spellcasting power in reserve via a collection of scrolls, wands, or both. Scrolls are a great way to carry along useful spells (such as *knock*, *dispel magic*, or *remove curse*) that you might not use in every adventure. Wands are great for bread-and-butter spells that you use often, especially combat spells such as *shield*, *blur*, and *haste*. Furthermore, both scrolls and wands are a great way to expand your spell selection beyond your personal repertoire of spells. If a spell is on the sorcerer/wizard class spell list and belongs to the abjuration, divination, enchantment, illusion, or transmutation school, you can use it from a scroll or wand even if you don't know how to cast it yourself. If you've spent some skill points on the Use Magic Device skill, you may even be able to use scrolls or wands for spells that aren't on your class spell list, and doing so often proves less risky than trying to steal a spell from a foe.
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About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the Sage of **Dragon** Magazine for eighteen years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not his friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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